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ABSTRACT

For many rural residents, life is often characterized by harsh circumstances that threaten the very fabric of their existence, while for others, who tend to identify with a higher socio-economic class, rural living is a conscious choosing of an alternative lifestyle. Schools within these rural communities would also be quite different from their urban and suburban counterparts. The most obvious characteristic of rural schools is their smallness which results in different climate and atmosphere. It is understandable that rural guidance counselors face many positive as well as challenging stressors in their daily lives. This study used qualitative methods to determine the professional and personal climate of school counselors within rural areas of Maine. Data were collected through group and individual interviews with guidance counselors (N=16). Nine different themes were covered during the interviewing process: isolation, guidance program issues, relationship with administration, professional development, personal environment, professional resources, professional environment, recruitment, and networking. Results indicated that there were unique challenges as well as deeply personal and professionally satisfying advantages to serving as a school guidance counselor in a rural setting. (Author/ABL)

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The Joys and Challenges of School Counseling Professionals in Rural Communities: A Qualitative Research Study

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Abstract

Qualitative methods were used to determine the professional and personal climate of school counselors within rural areas of Maine. Data were collected through group and individual interviews from sixteen guidance counselors. Nine different themes were covered during the interviewing process: isolation, guidance program issues, relationship with administration, professional development, personal environment, professional resources, professional environment, recruitment, and networking. Results indicated that there are unique challenges as well as deeply personal and professionally satisfying advantages to serving as a school guidance counselor in a rural setting.

The Joys and Challenges of School Counseling Professionals in Rural Communities: A Qualitative Research Study

Those who reside in urbanized areas of Maine can experience the illusion that their state has become part of modern, contemporary America. But the reality is that, in spite of rapid growth in recent years, Maine is still considered a rural state by national standards, with hundreds of isolated communities which have a culture quite unlike that of a modern city. Nearly half of the state's territory is uninhabited. Roughly 52% of Maine's people live in rural areas with a density of 37.8 persons per square mile as compared with the national average of 67 persons per square mile (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1988). In spite of significant population increases in recent years, many of the most distant areas continue to lose population through out-migration and have smaller populations today than they had a century ago (Maine State Planning Office, 1984). These small rural communities are not miniature versions of larger cities, but have unique characteristics and needs. "Red tape" bureaucratic issues are rare; social relations tend to be more personal, and community values tend to be more traditional (McIntire, Marion, Quaglia, 1990). Lest the reader come to the quick conclusion that rural life is close to idyllic and trouble free,

some realities of country life must be acknowledged. Coward and Jackson (1983), in discussing the environmental stress of the rural family, made the following observations:

> (1) Rural residents experience a greater incidence, prevalence and severity of malnutrition than their urban counterparts.
> (2) Almost one-half of all occupied substandard housing and about two-thirds of all houses without adequate plumbing are located in rural communities.
> (3) Rural families have the nation's highest rates of maternal and infant mortality.
> (4) Unemployment and underemployment rates are higher for rural than for urban areas.
> (5) The rate of increase in divorces in rural areas exceeds that of metropolitan America.
> (6) Whereas one in nine urban residents lives below the poverty line, one in six rural residents is in the same situation.
>
> (p 189)

For many rural residents, life is often characterized by harsh circumstances that threaten the very fabric of their existence (Hansen, 1987) while for others, who tend to identify with a higher socio-economic class, rural living is a conscious choosing of an alternative lifestyle. The juxtaposition of these two groups is striking.

It would seem understandable that schools within these rural communities would also be quite different from their urban and suburban counterparts. As Sutton and Southworth (1990) wrote: "Rural schools seem to have an educational environment with unique characteristics." The most obvious characteristic of rural schools is their smallness which results in a different climate and atmosphere. There is a sense of community, identity, pride, and ownership that rarely exists within larger schools. The informal environment, with its limited formalization and control, can enhance the interdependence between school and community, thus nurturing a quality educational process (McIntire, Marion, Quaglia, 1990). There is irony in the school district consolidation movement which assumed that bigger was better. As serious concerns develop over the consolidated school district concept, there is renewed interest in rural school models (Sher, 1981).

With these characteristics, it is understandable that rural guidance counselors face many positive as well as challenging stressors in their daily lives. Previous research (Sutton, 1989; Sutton & Southworth, 1990) reports that many rural guidance counselors appreciate the tranquility of a rural setting, enjoy doing a variety of tasks within a school system, have a close relationship with administrators and teachers, feel supported professionally and believe that they are making a real difference in the lives of children. On

the negative side, counselors also complain of living in a "fishbowl" without adequate privacy, of performing many non-guidance tasks, of inadequate community referral resources, and of missing the professional stimulation of colleagues as well as proximity to a university (McIntire, Marion, Quaglia, 1990; Sutton, 1990).

Some individuals love guidance counseling in a rural setting while others hate it. Many school counselors serving in rural isolated areas, including coastal islands, soon become dissatisfied and disenchanted, while others seem to enjoy and even thrive on the challenges of living and working in a less populated, less urbanized environment. Then there are those individuals who experience a love/hate relationship who somehow live in a state of creative, ambiguous tension between the positive and negative aspects of rural guidance counseling. An explanation of this interesting phenomenon is unclear.

Research on this topic is still in its infancy with limited data available (R.E. Pearson and J.M. Sutton, Personal Communication, October 26, 1990). It is important for those entering the rural school guidance field to understand the significant dynamics of rural communities and their schools. The purpose of this study is to discover, through a qualitative inquiry,

some of the important variables that influence personal and professional satisfaction for counselors in rural areas.

Interviewing

Participants

Sixteen school guidance counselors agreed to participate in this qualitative study. Ages of participants ranged from approximately 30 to 64 with years of experience ranging from two to 32. Of the participants, ten were male and six were female. The selection criteria were based on locating counselors who (a) represented schools in rural areas, (b) represented different areas of Maine, (c) represented schools in isolated areas such as coastal islands. All of the participants in this study live and work in rural areas of northern, western and southern Maine as well as three coastal islands.

Defining "rural" is not an easy task. A broad, uncomplicated definition fits well the population of this study: "Rural communities are those with a small population, geographically dispersed households and low-density single family housing" (Sutton & Southworth, 1990). An island community may have a cluster of households within a relatively small area while being geographically isolated from the mainland. Population

is only part of the complex definition of ruralness. Another powerful characteristic of rural communities is that their members tend to be economically poor (Maine State Planning Office, 1985). This is certainly true of rural Maine with a number of rural counties reporting *per capita* income of under $10,000 a year such as Aroostook $9,040, Franklin $8,983 and Washington $8,735 (County and City Data Book, 1988).

Data Collection

Initial data were gathered from a group interview of guidance counselors in western Maine. This interview can best be described as a guided conversation among the author of this paper, his University of Southern Maine advisor, Dr. John Sutton, and six participants. This open-ended interview format encouraged the free-flowing of responses to a series of questions centered around the characteristics of working in a rural community. This inquiry process, involving the immediate and active presence of the researchers, is a crucial aspect of qualitative research data gathering (Wilcox, 1988).

Following this group interview the data collected were analyzed and ideas, themes and categories were developed. Comparing this information with previous research helped to solidify, refine and clarify theme categories.

Broad categories were narrowed down during this refinement process. This inductive, heuristic process resulted in nine different themes: isolation, guidance program issues, relationship with administration, professional development, personal environment, resources, professional environment, recruitment and networking.

From these nine themes were developed a series of questions which were used in the interviewing process. (See Appendix.)

This researcher personally interviewed five of the participants at their respective schools. These interviewing sessions lasted an average of one hour and were marked by the cooperation and interest of the interviewees. Six of the participants were interviewed over the phone with an average of thirty minutes per call. Comparing the data between personal and phone interviews, there was a significantly higher level of openness among those interviewed face to face over those interviewed via the phone. Three questionnaires and audio tapes were sent by mail with instructions to tape record the answers and return the tape. Two were returned. These two participants appeared to be appreciative of this format, remarking that the solitary interviewing experience was quite cathartic for them.

Findings

Below is a summary of the data obtained from the interviews organized under the nine themes.

Isolation

All of the participants acknowledged that living and working in an isolated area can be stressful, especially for a single person. Those who seem to cope well appear to have strong family ties, "My spouse is my best friend and colleague.", and nurturing friends close by or within phone reach. Some rural counselors spend hundreds of dollars monthly communicating with family and friends.

Another significant factor is the capacity to be alone. An island counselor remarked, "At this point in my life I am appreciating the solitude and quiet." This capacity to be alone is a significant aspect of an inner security which is connected to emotional maturity. Solitude is often linked with self-discovery and self-realization, with becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feelings and impulses (Storr, 1988). Counselors who lack a strong inner self and have problems with personal autonomy could have serious problems adjusting to the culture and lifestyle of rural living.

Guidance Program

The majority (14 out of 16) reported having to perform non-guidance tasks such as scheduling, hall duty, excessive paper work, testing, record keeping, administration and, in the case of one counselor, driving the island school bus. Some complained of being overworked with extra responsibilities while others enjoyed the diversity, feeling that anything related to assisting children is guidance. These diverse tasks not only define the counselor's role but have led to a compromise of contemporary counseling goals (Sutton, 1990). One explanation of this phenomenon is that some school guidance counselors become comfortable performing tasks that they do well and are uncomfortable and often threatened by a proposed new role and style which may conflict with their personalities and training (Bandura, 1977). Further research is needed to explore this internal, often unconscious resistance.

Rural counselors often face external cultural resistance which is hidden and implicit. A guidance counselor close to the Canadian border reported, "There is real resistance to a developmental guidance program here. Most people don't want programs and have little interest in new ideas. In an economically depressed area, people are struggling to survive." The problem of low aspirations among rural youth is a serious challenge. When basic physiological and safety needs

are threatened or not met, it is difficult for an individual to focus on higher level needs (Maslow, 1954). Another counselor who serves two island communities remarked, "You can't always do what you'd like. I tried to implement a community substance abuse program and could not get anyone to serve on the committee. The issue is too threatening since islands have such a serious drinking problem. Some things you just don't go against when working on an island." Certain norms are inflexible. The nature of the isolated island culture often constrains the educational process.

Resistance to change is a fact of life for rural guidance counselors, albeit a normal phenomenon. As the Maine writer Caskie Stinnett (1984) once wrote, "Maine does this to a man; there's something in the air here that endows the status quo with more weight than it possibly deserves." As one island counselor remarked, "A counselor who works on an island needs to be an emotionally secure person who has a high level of maturity to understand these people and their cultural dynamics. It takes many years to build up trust." This same counselor made it quite clear that if confidentiality with an islander is betrayed, "you're finished as a counselor. You might as well pack up and leave."

Relationship with Administrators

The overwhelming response was positive, reporting close and supportive relationships with school administrators. "Seventy-five percent of my 32 years have been positive. I'm listened to by administrators who are very supportive. I have experienced a true partnership with little or no bureaucracy." This response is significant, since according to Sutton (1990), a supportive supervising administrator is a strong predictor of high counselor self-efficacy. School principals appear to play an important role in terms of providing enthusiastic support for guidance programs as well as giving encouragement to the counselor.

The one apparent disadvantage of having such a close, supportive relationship with administrators is being asked to cover administrative duties when the principal is away. This can cause possible role confusion with all concerned, including teachers, students and parents as well as within the counselors themselves. This pattern of behavior contributes to the ambiguity and a lack of role clarity within the school counseling profession.

Professional Development

The majority of counselors interviewed were pleased and satisfied with their professional development support from their school systems. Many are reimbursed for up to nine credits per year of continuing education courses and are encouraged to attend workshops, seminars and conferences. Only two counselors reported little or no support, with both of these individuals serving extremely poor communities. One counselor stated, "There is no money here. We are not allowed to go out of town for any continuing education experiences."

A common complaint centered around the inability to connect with other school guidance counselors. One counselor remarked, "I miss the feedback, the understanding, the empathy that only another guidance counselor can give." Another stated, "Meeting a colleague often involves driving long distances which strains the pocketbook."

Most of the participants in this study belong to the AACD and receive at least one professional journal monthly. Being so isolated, they anticipate receiving their "monthly stimulation". On the whole, these counselors take seriously the importance of ongoing professional growth.

Personal Environment

Most of the participants in this study appreciate rural life with its unspoiled beauty along with the opportunity to spend significant time outdoors. Practically speaking, homes are less expensive in rural areas. Many sought out a rural position in order to raise a family with a different set of values and priorities. One significant finding is that the majority of counselors in this study intentionally live outside of the school district in which they work in order to secure a more private life. They believe boundaries between work and home life are clear and inviolate. Those counselors who do live in the same community often experience living "in a fishbowl" and having their personal and professional boundaries violated by members of the community. In this situation there is no clear separation between work and a private life. Gossip is common in a small, isolated community with the guidance counselor being watched constantly. In spite of these problems, some counselors do appreciate living within the school community, reporting a need to belong and to be a valued, important professional in town.

Professional Environment

The most common response from these counselors interviewed was the belief that they were making an

impact on the lives of kids. "In spite of the depravations, the low aspirations, and the seemingly insurmountable obstacles, many youth grow up to be responsible, happy adults. I just know I had something to do with their personal growth." The feeling of being needed was another dominant theme. "I love what I am doing. I surround myself with positive, upbeat people." Another counselor remarked, "I love the rural area and the people. I love them the way they are. You need to see the goodness in these people. They have a wealth of knowledge about life and survival, how to fish and survive with little firewood in the cold of winter - these things are passed down from generation to generation. In spite of so many problems, they are successful in the way they want to be successful."

Many of the counselors appreciated the school climate with its positive, affirming qualities often comparing it to a caring, supportive extended family. One expressive counselor remarked, "It is good here. What a difference compared to the last school where everyone was so competitive, trying to climb the career ladder. Here, everyone is like a family."

Resources

All of the participants reported a critical shortage of competent therapists in rural areas. It is not

uncommon to have a three- to six-month backlog in case referrals. This unfortunate reality often necessitates rural counselors' assuming responsibility for most counseling whether they feel qualified or not. One typical response is, "I'm it. I must rely on my own skills and experience. Some days I feel like I'm in an emergency room having to deal with a critical situation. It's very intense, and I must make profound judgments every day."

Cultural taboos also prevail against many who need counseling support. "Many of the old-timers perceive going to a counselor as being really crazy." Poverty plays an unfortunate role in community referrals with few having the financial resources to pay for the needed weekly treatment. The paucity of other resources also adds stress and strain to the demands of a rural guidance counselor. One counselor sadly remarked, "The hospital is so far away that many critically ill people die before they receive medical help."

Recruitment

Small rural communities have difficulty attracting and retaining guidance counselors. The reasons reported include isolation, low pay along with unstable working conditions. One counselor responded, "I never know if I have a job next year. I was offered the job on the spot, but I don't know how long I will stay. The

isolation is killing me." One island counselor remarked, "There is a romantic notion about working on an island off the coast of Maine. However, turnover is high once reality sets in." Yet, there are counselors who truly enjoy working in a rural setting and remain in their positions for extended periods of time.

Networking

All of the participants stated that networking was important for them. A typical response reflected a unanimous opinion: "Absolutely crucial. I don't see how one could get along without networking. It would lead to stagnation and 'burnout'." Another counselor turns to non-guidance professionals for support. "My networking is with teachers and administrators here." Others commit themselves to participating in continuing education activities. "I attend classes and programs at University of Southern Maine where I meet other counselors. I serve on various committees in professional organizations, as well as going to conferences and workshops."

Often it is difficult to network due to time and distance constraints. It is a major scheduling challenge to connect with colleagues on a regular basis. Therefore, many guidance counselors network over the telephone or not at all.

Implications

This study supports and reinforces previous research of the unique characteristics of serving as a school guidance counselor in isolated rural areas. Individuals contemplating a school guidance position in a rural setting should consider and explore a number of important variables in their decision-making and self-assessment process. They need to have realistic expectations about living in a isolated rural area. The various myths about the idyllic, tranquil life in the country, or on a coastal island, must be compared to the documented realities of rural living (Hansen, 1987). Isolation and loneliness are critical stressors among rural guidance counselors. Single counselors, without significant, intimate relationships, are especially vulnerable to discouragement, depression, and "burnout". The individual's need for emotional closeness, communication, belonging to a caring and supportive community must be considered in light of the specific rural environment. Tranquility can quickly become "cabin fever", especially during long and harsh winters. The results of this study point to the importance of a rural guidance counselor's having strong emotional support from significant others on an ongoing basis. Few individuals can handle the deleterious effects of stress associated with rural isolation without interaction with friends and loved ones. The few who

appear to cope well without strong support from others are independent, autonomous individuals who appreciate and value solitude.

Rural school counselors also struggle with professional isolation, seeking opportunities whenever possible to nurture support with colleagues. Long distances between counselors, however, often prevent ongoing support. The use of the telephone is helpful as a coping strategy for many counselors. A number of counselors reported having strong and supportive relationships with the principal/superintendent. One counselor remarked, "My principal, who is also the superintendent, is a warm, caring, easy-to-relate-to person. I have lunch with him on a regular basis."

There are also limited support resources within a rural school system for the guidance counselor to tap. Supervision is needed to provide technical assistance, feedback, and encouragement. Yet, many rural counselors only have the principal or superintendent available. This individual may be a friend, but lack the necessary supervision skills. There is a need for counselors to network with other professionals for ongoing support.

Lacking personal and professional support, a rural guidance counselor is vulnerable to significant problems that can result in serious consequences.

A rural guidance counselor needs to have realistic expectations about being a change-agent in a culture that resists change with often hidden, implicit, inflexible norms. These sociocultural conditions can soon turn an overly idealistic and enthusiastic counselor into a cynical, negative resentful individual who will abandon the area.

Another issue of concern relates to role and function. Role overload, or excessive responsibilities for the rural counselor, can result in additional stress. Inadequate school and community resources often create pressure for guidance counselors to carry out inappropriate duties, such as long-term individual and family counseling. With a critical shortage of therapists in rural areas, guidance counselors often assume responsibility for community counseling, regardless of their qualifications. This condition also places guidance counselors in a tenuous legal and ethical position. Guidance counselors who practice in rural schools face challenges quite unlike their suburban or urban counterparts, and specific programs are needed at the graduate level to increase their ability to function well in this setting.

As noted in this study, self-assessment is a crucial component in the consideration of a career as a school guidance counselor. Although applicants must go through an assessment process for admission to graduate school,

there is no self-assessment model available for students completing their programs to help them decide whether to work in a rural or urban setting. A self-assessment model would provide additional information to assist students in identifying how their personalities, abilities and needs fit into many of the characteristics of rural life.

Educators have recognized the need to prepare teachers for rural classrooms (Guenther, Weible, 1983). If this is true for teachers, it is certainly true for school guidance counselors. Yet few educational institutions appear to be responding to this critical need. It is assumed that a Master's program can be generalizable to all school settings. This study, along with previous research (McIntire, W.G., Marion, S.F., & Quaglia, R., 1990; Sutton & Southworth, 1990) seriously questions whether this assumption is true. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect universities to implement major changes in their program to include issues unique to counselors in rural settings. However, one realistic goal is to include information about the many differences between urban and rural placement in a typical "Introduction to Guidance" course. Topics could include understanding the dynamics of life in rural communities, coping with isolation, creating a self-directed personal and professional approach, dealing with role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload.

For those students who have an interest in rural settings, internships should be made available to provide real life training in rural schools.

The purpose of this study was to discover, through qualitative inquiry, ~~into~~ some of the important variables that influence personal and professional satisfaction for counselors in rural areas. The findings demonstrate the ~~need~~ need to understand there are unique characteristics of isolated rural communities which create complex challenges as well as deeply satisfying personal and professional experiences. It appears essential that guidance counselors know themselves well: their strengths, weaknesses, vulnerabilities, inner motives and how these characteristics and needs might be integrated into a particular geographical and cultural setting.

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Appendix

Rural School Counseling Interview Format

1. Who do you turn to for emotional support when your professional and personal life gets stressful?

2. How close do you come between your perceived ideal role as a guidance counselor and the actual reality of what you do?

3. Share some thoughts and feelings about your relationship with administrators in your school.

4. How does your school system support you in the area of professional development and how satisfied are you with this support?

5. What were the factors that drew you to consider a guidance position in a rural community, and what present benefits keep you where you are?

6. What are the things you feel good about professionally in your work?

7. What professional resources are available to you in the community and how adequate are they?

8. What are the problems/issues around the recruitment of guidance counselors to a rural community?

9. How important is networking for you as a guidance professional?